

National

Gypsies on greenbelt site face eviction after court ruling

Helen Pidd

More than 100 Gypsy families living illegally on greenbelt land in Essex were yesterday told they would be evicted after a senior judge ruled that allowing them to stay would encourage others to follow their lead.

Three judges at the appeal court in London ruled that Basildon council was right to order the forcible clearing of pitches on long-standing caravan sites at Dale Farm and Hovefields Drive in Basildon, Essex.

Ninety families at Dale Farm and a further 15 at Hovefields would have to leave their homes, leaving almost 500 people

homeless, said Grattan Puxon, secretary of the Dale Farm housing association.

The residents vowed to carry on their efforts to stay, saying they would seek leave to appeal to the House of Lords.

"We'll do whatever it takes," Maryann McCarthy, 67, said from her mobile home at Dale Farm yesterday. "We're not going to give up. This is my home. I've been here for seven years, and I have seven children, 17 grandchildren and one great-grandchild here too. Where else are we supposed to go?"

Basildon council has spent more than £750,000 in legal fees on the case, a spokesman said. The council estimated it would cost £1.5m-£2m to evict the Gypsies.

The Dale Farm site, a former scrapyard, has been home to Gypsies since the 1960s, when planning permission was granted to 40 families, people not affected by yesterday's court decision. There are now estimated to be up to 1,000 people living on the site, making up 40% of all of Essex's traveller population. About half

£2m The amount it could cost Basildon council to evict 90 Gypsy families living illegally on greenbelt land in Essex

of this number do not have permission to live there though most of them own their land plots, which had been cheap to buy because of planning restrictions that accompanied the greenbelt designation.

In his ruling Lord Justice Pill said that since 1990 the number of Gypsy and traveller caravans in Basildon district had increased by 475%. The national increase had been 44%. Quoting from a previous case, he said the court would be "slow to grant protection to those who, in conscious defiance of the prohibitions of the law, establish a home on an environmentally protected site".

The court battle started in 2005, when the council voted to remove people who

had no planning permission for caravans. Legal wrangles prevented their eviction.

The Gypsies, who live in touring caravans and permanent "park homes", say they are persecuted by society. "No other ethnic minority group would be treated like this," said McCarthy. "There are so many of us here, lots of old people, sick people and pregnant women, and yet the council wants us out even though we pay our taxes and own our pitches."

Bala Mahendran, chief executive of Basildon district council, said: "Although officers will start detailed planning for the clearance operation straight away, any evictions will not take place immediately."

Fresh inquest